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ROBERT HENRI

BY

HELEN APPLETON READ



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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in the preparation of this volume we wish to express our deep gratitude to Miss Violet Organ for writing the Biographical Note of Robert Henri and for the loan of her collection of photographs of his work; and we wish further to acknowledge our indebtedness to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Wm. McKillop

ROBERT HENRI

ROBERT HENRI

BY

HELEN APPLETON READ

EVEN during his life time a legend had sprung up about Robert Henri. A legend, as is so often the case with legends, depending as much upon the effect of a magnetic personality as upon actual accomplishment—but differing in one important respect from the orbit followed by legend-making personalities, it reached its height while he was a young man and commenced waning while he was still at the height of his productive powers. Now that the time had come to estimate Henri's contribution to American art the factors which contributed to the creating of the legend and those which tended to dispel it must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, estimating Henri's contribution to American art is not merely assigning him the proper niche in the American Hall of Fame, it resolves itself quite as much in recognizing the influence that his personality and aesthetic philosophy had upon the development of art in this country.

Robert Henri was a great teacher. A man with enormous personal magnetism. He was probably the greatest single influence in American art. If one concedes the controversial existence of an American school—then Henri founded it. His teaching was not merely a case of passing on to his pupils such technical facts as he believed were essential to a painter's equipment, it embodied a philosophy of life as well whose basic tenets were humanity and liberalism. Their observance paved the way for the independent idea in this country and the acceptance of modern art.

In that extraordinarily personal compilation of Henri's sayings collected by Margery Ryerson under the title, "The Art Spirit," there are aphorisms which belong in any glossary of American philosophy. When he said "The distinguishing mark of all great men is their humanity,"

he was voicing his own distinguishing characteristic, the characteristic which was also the common denominator of his painting and philosophy of life—the quality that inspired such ardent devotion in all those who sought his advice or came within the circle of his friendship. Once a Henri pupil always a Henri pupil. Which is to say that the point of view with which he imbued his pupils has not grown stale or been superseded by succeeding cults and movements since humanity continues to be one of the verities.

George Bellows, Rockwell Kent, Edward Hopper, Guy Pène du Bois and Glenn Coleman were among his pupils and continued, each according to his personal interpretation the aesthetic philosophy that he taught them. And he accomplished this, not through the imposition of a technique or through a conscious effort to found an American school, but by revealing art as a medium with which to express life. To understand why relating art to life was epochal, why it became a cause and why those who followed the leadership of the man who preached this aesthetic gospel were classed as radicals, it is necessary to reconstruct the point of view that prevailed when Henri first established his reputation as trail blazer and liberal.

In the early 1900's, when Henri was first widely acclaimed as the bad boy of American art, American taste and production were at their lowest ebb. Sentimental landscapes, studio models posed in period costumes, sweetened puritanized nudes, deleted of every vestige of sensuous allure that at least gave their Salon prototypes a *raison d'être*, were the pictures that took prizes and were bought by collectors. The schools followed the lead set by current standards of taste.

When Henri returned from Europe he brought with him a new set of values. His own tendency to regard painting as an interpretation of life had been strengthened by his admiration for Courbet's warm humanity and Manet's interest in the contemporary scene. In the nineties and early 1900's Manet and Courbet were still regarded as radicals, their

pictures were collected by only a few connoisseurs. The salonniers and academicians held sway in France as in this country. Henri's affiliation with the left wing evinced itself as early as 1888 when he made his first trip to Paris and where he found prevailing standards of teaching unsympathetic to his ideals. In between European visits he had already commenced establishing his reputation for liberalism in painting as well as teaching. The Philadelphia School of Design for Women was his first vehicle for expounding his ideas on art and life. His association with such kindred spirits as George Luks, John Sloan, Everett Shinn, and William Glackens in the Philadelphia group was the nucleus from which developed the independent idea. It was not, however, until he returned to this country in 1901 after his third trip to Paris and settled in New York that his reputation as archradical and leader of a new school was firmly established.

What was the magic that gave these glamorous portraits of dark-haired women in white—sometimes they were red-haired women—their power to stir the imagination of the younger generation to the extent that they did? Why did they arouse a crusading spirit such as has only been paralleled in the battle over modern art? As we look at them now they seem inherently conservative, savoring more of Whistler and Manet's refinements than Courbet's exuberant humanism. And it was their too warm-blooded realism it must be remembered that caused the schism between the academic conservatives and the radicals. Even then, I suspect, it was the aura of Henri's personality and the ideals he was battling for that lent them a radicalism that they did not in actuality possess. Liberalism, down with corrupt officialdom, relating art to life, were concepts which came to be synonymous with his painting. It is true that when contrasted with the insipidities which passed as portraits of human beings in current academies the frankness of their appeal as women was startling. They reflected what was always Henri's major aim, getting the essential quality of his sitter's personality. Throughout his long and prolific career, in

which portrait painting was his typical expression, this effort to isolate the quality that makes people themselves remains a constant factor.

In the matter of teaching Henri's radicalism was largely a matter of point of view. He did not introduce startling new esthetic formulas except in so much as he advised his pupils to paint directly without making a preliminary drawing and filling it in with color as was the then prevailing method of academic instruction. But he had the priceless pedagogical gift of stirring the imagination of his pupils—of making them excited about their work. There was far less talk of brushwork, as it was called then, than in the Chase and Mora classes at 'The Art Students' League. And this despite the fact that Henri himself was an exponent of brushwork and possessed an amazing technical facility which was a distinct detriment in an aesthetic code that emphasized an interpretation of life rather than an exposition of virtuosity.

In the Henri classes painting was revealed to the pre-war generation for the first time as only another medium whereby the emotions of every day life could be expressed. All the arts were discovered as kindred and relevant to painting. Isadora Duncan, Wagner, Dostoievski were discussed with Manet, Daumier, Eakins and Courbet. While he brought to our attention the great names of the nineteenth century European painting—the men who had been the graphic historians of their day—still to win recognition abroad and practically unknown in this country—he also taught us to appreciate the native genius. He was the first teacher to point out Eakins's rugged integrity and Ryder's romanticism as being distinctly American in quality. In the Henri class I heard Walt Whitman for the first time unblushingly discussed in a mixed gathering. Advising his pupils to go to the life about them for subject—advocating the axiom that it is not the subject but what you feel about it that counts—was heady theory to the youth of the first decade of this century brought up on the 'T-square' method of instruction and to whom subject had been more or less a peg on which to hang technique. The Henri class became

the rallying ground for eager youth. When we packed our paint-boxes and journeyed north from the then conservative classes of the League to the Henri School in the old Lincoln Arcade, it was tantamount to throwing our gauntlets in the face of the old order.

Living fully, as a necessary ingredient to the production of vital work, brought about a reaction from Victorian conservatism in manners and morals, as well as in art. This Tolstoyan point of view, which advocated all life as subject matter for art, brought in its wake the belief that the working classes and the slums were nearer the realities and, therefore, more fitting subjects for art. This induced a species of socialism, and the Henri School came to stand for all forms of radicalism and independence. Self-conscious and naïve as much of this may now seem, nevertheless, it fostered the spirit of independence and tolerance without which subsequent liberal movements would have been impeded.

John Sloan, in his foreword to the Henri Memorial Exhibition which was held at the Metropolitan Museum in the spring of 1931, said of this preparation, "His thirty years of teaching were devoted to the emancipation of the art spirit in the United States, his work and inspiration as a teacher were factors in preparing the way for the earnest and growing interest in art which is so clearly evidenced in this young country today."

The first concrete group expression of the new liberalism was in 1910 when an Independent Exhibition was held in a loft building on Thirty-Fourth Street. This had no relation except in spirit to The Society of Independent Artists formed six years later. Henri's portrait of Mrs. Henri was given the place of honor, one of those vivid character studies which give reality to his reputation of relating art to life. Rockwell Kent, George Bellows, Randall Davey, Homer Boss, Glenn Coleman and Dorothy Rice were among the exhibitors. Bellows showed one of his prize-fight series, the Johnson-Dempsey Fight, which called forth more violent excoriations than did *The Nude Descending the Stairs* when it was exhibited at The Armory Show three years later.

Difficult as it must have been to cede his place as radical and trail blazer to the new order which even overlooked his contribution in preparing the way for the new trails, he never ceased to give his sympathetic support to any sincere expression of opinion whether or not it coincided with his point of view.

Of the so called modern movement inaugurated by the Armory Show in this country Henri commented with characteristic liberality:

"There always has been a new movement, and there always will be a new movement. It is strange that a thing which comes as regularly as clockwork should be a surprise.

"In new movements, the pendulum takes a great swing, charlatans crowd in, innocent apes follow, the masters make their successes, and they make their mistakes as all pioneers must do. It is necessary to pierce to the core, to get at the value of a movement, and not be confused by its sensational exterior."

He believed that the most vital of art of all time has its roots firmly planted in the soil of life. Furthermore, that the American temperament was fundamentally opposed to the cerebral formalization of art with its almost complete nullification of human and emotional elements which was one of the basic tenets of the modern European school. The growing tendency of the more gifted young American painters to return to human experiences for their inspiration demonstrates this.

Emerson had the same thought in mind when he said, "The fine arts have nothing casual but spring from the deepest instincts of the people who created them."

But with the liberal idea firmly entrenched Henri retired from the scene of action except in so far as he supported the independent idea by sending faithfully to the Independent's Annual Exhibition. His productivity did not however, abate. He continued to paint "my people" as he called the types who stirred a responsive chord in him, whether they were Spanish gypsies, Irish peasants, Japanese, Indians or Americans.

The strong family resemblance found in any representative collection of his work is due to his being unable to do good work unless his subject possessed a quality of inner intensity to which he responded. Dignity, he called it, and by dignity he meant poise and harmony between the inner and the outer being.

When he painted a portrait commission, with its inevitable limitations and where the response so necessary for him to do his best work was frequently absent, the result became an impersonal demonstration of his amazing virtuosity. Conscious of this he tended away from portrait painting and during the later years of his life dedicated his talent almost exclusively to painting types which interested him primarily from the human angle, notably the series of sympathetic and tender portraits of children.

Even now when it is still difficult to weigh and balance the relative merits of his pictures these portraits and the earlier full length portraits of women would seem to be the summation of his skill as a painter and sensitive recorder of personality. In the story of American painting they are outstanding contributions in realistic portrait painting.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ROBERT HENRI was born June 25, 1865, the son of John and Theresa Henri. His family of French, English and Irish origin had lived for generations in Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio, traveling much in the West during his boyhood.

In his early youth his family perceived signs of his artistic interest, and amongst his happiest memories were his visits to museums with his mother.

When twenty-one, Henri went to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He studied with Thomas Anshutz and a lasting friendship sprang up between them.

In 1888 he went to Paris, enrolled at Julien's and later the Beaux Arts. Almost from the start he was dissatisfied with painting as it was then taught; nevertheless he worked on assimilating what he needed of the formal teaching, but supplementing it with study of the old masters. It was hours spent in museums that gave him courage to break away from the style of painting of the day.

The summer of 1889 found Henri at Concarneau painting landscape. Back in Paris he set up his easel in an attic studio with a few rebel comrades, resolved to paint in his own way as he saw and felt life.

In 1891 Henri returned to America settling in Philadelphia. His studio at 806 Walnut Street was the rendezvous for men later to distinguish themselves as artists and sculptors.

In 1895 he went to Paris for a stay of two years.

In 1898 Henri married Miss Linda Craig of Philadelphia. He returned to Paris painting landscape, street scenes, and night scenes of sombre brilliance. One of the latter, *Café Terrace*, was awarded a silver medal in 1901. In 1904 *Young Woman in Black*, now in the Chicago Art Institute, was awarded a silver medal. In 1905 he received the Norman W. Harris prize from the Chicago Art Institute for his painting

Lady in Black. At this time Henri was first represented at the Salon in Paris by *La Neige* which was later purchased for the Luxembourg where it hangs today.

Henri taught at the Velin School and later became associated with the New York School of Art, then known as the Chase School. He gave generously of his enthusiasm, and encouraged the students to individuality. He brought to them knowledge of Velasquez, Rembrandt, Hals, of Goya and Manet, of Cézanne and Renoir. The Henri School was formed in 1909 and it was here that such men as Bellows, Coleman, Davey, Hopper, Kent, Speicher and others were launched on their careers. The last school with which Henri was connected was the Art Students' League, and it was from notes taken there as well as at the Henri School that his book "The Art Spirit" was later compiled.

Henri's one man show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1907 marked him as an outstanding American artist. Another summer at Concarneau and Henri returned to settle on Fifty-seventh Street overlooking the East River.

In 1908, Mrs. Henri having died in 1905, he married Miss Marjorie Organ, herself an artist. They went to Spain that summer, where many of Henri's most important canvases were painted, including *Spanish Gypsy*, now in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum.

In 1910 he was in the group that instituted the First Independent. This event marked the first exhibition (of art) in America without the sanction of a jury. He was also the author of the selective group idea of the MacDowell Club.

In 1913 he visited Ireland for the first time. *Himself* and *Herself*, now in the Chicago Art Institute, were painted there. The war kept him in America until 1923 when he went again to Spain and thence to Ireland, returning to Ireland every summer thereafter until his death. *Wee Woman*, a painting of an Irish child done in 1927, was awarded the Temple Gold Medal in 1929.

Henri died July 12, 1929.

A Memorial Exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the spring of 1931, and at the Baltimore Museum shortly after, was a complete and significant showing of his life's work.

Honors came to Henri despite the fact that he was ruggedly outspoken against injustice and smugness in the art world. His pictures are in private collections and in almost every museum of importance in the country.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

WEE WOMAN, 1927
h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

*Collection of Mrs. Howell Howard
Dayton, Ohio*



C A R A, 1926

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



OLD SEGOVIANO, 1924 (*Madrid*)

H. 32 inches W. 26 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



S U M M E R S T O R M , 1 9 2 1

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York

Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art



INDIAN GIRL OF SANTA CLARA, 1917
(*Santa Fe, N. M.*)

H. 32 inches W. 26 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



BEACH HAT, 1914 (*La Jolla, California*)

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts

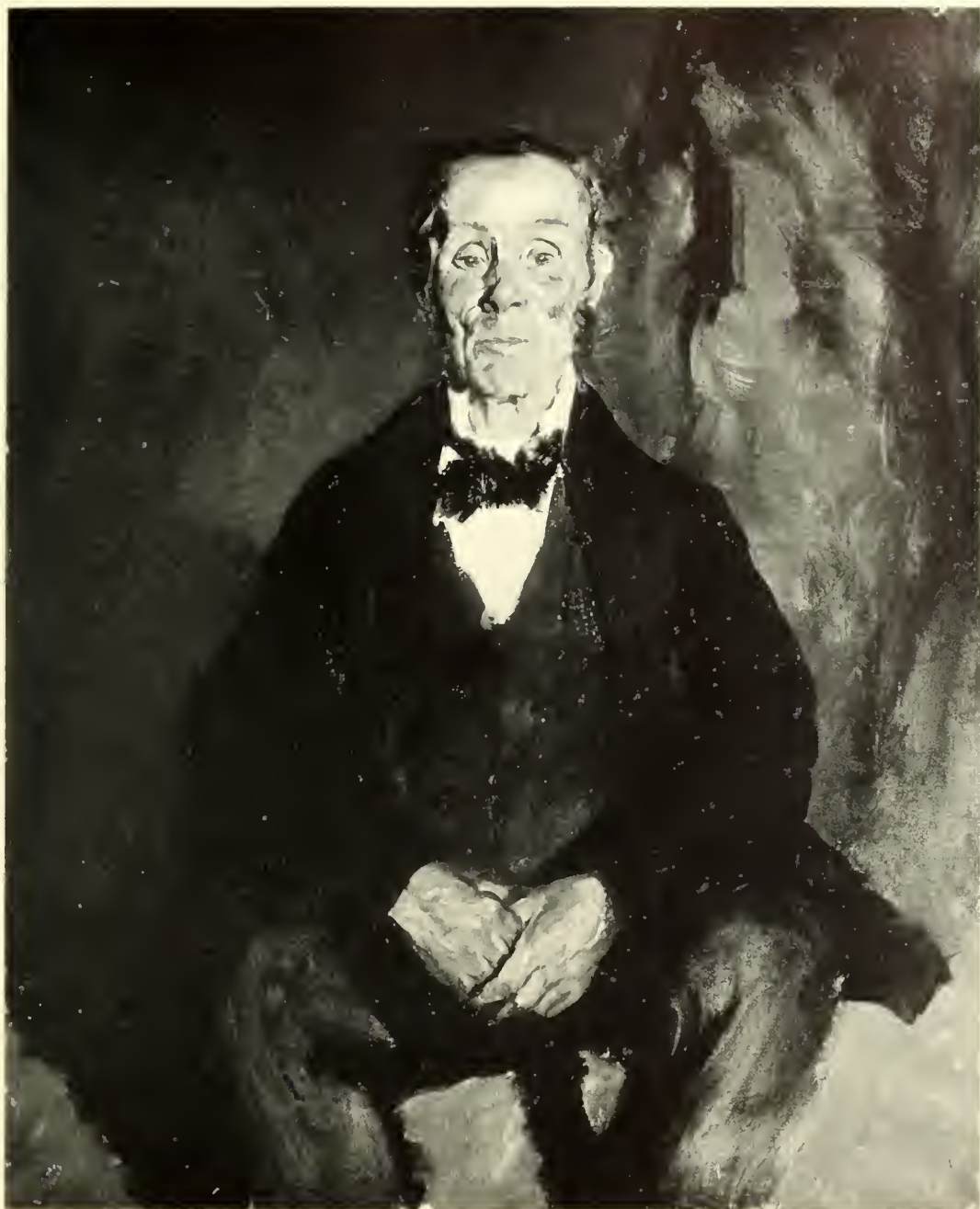


ART. 1000

GUIDE TO CROAGHAN, 1913 (*Ireland*)

h. 11 inches w. 33 inches

Collection of Miss Julia E. Peck, New York



RED TOP, 1910 (*Haarlem, Holland*)

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Collection of Mr. Amos R. E. Pinchot
New York



THE WORKING MAN, 1910
(*Haarlem, Holland*)

H. 24 inches W. 20 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



LITTLE SPANISH DANCER, 1910

h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



FAY BAINTER

H. 41 inches W. 33 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



EVA GREEN, 1907
h. 24 inches w. 20 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



YOUNG WOMAN IN WHITE—PROFILE

1904

h. $78\frac{1}{4}$ inches w. $37\frac{3}{4}$ inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York

Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art



LADY IN BLACK, 1904

h. 78 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches w. 38 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York

Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art



WOMAN IN WHITE. 1904
h. 77 inches w. 38 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York
Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art



DANCER WITH CASTANET. 1904

h. 84½ inches w. 44¾ inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York

Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art



BOY AND RAINBOW, 1902 (*Normandy*)

h. 26 inches w. 32 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



FIFTY-SEVENTH STREET, 1902

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



ON THE MARNE, 1899 (*Alfort, Paris*)

h. 26 inches w. 32 inches

Estate of Mrs. Robert Henri, New York



LA NEIGE, 1899

h. 26 inches w. 32 inches

*Collection Musée de Luxembourg
Paris, France*



Luxembourg 1927

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